

Travellers' Rest (Judge John Overton House)
North side of Farrell Parkway
Nashville
Davidson County
Tennessee

HABS No. TN-14

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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Architectural and Engineering Record
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. TN-14

TRAVELLERS' REST
(Judge John Overton House)

Location: North side Farrell Parkway, just east of railroad and I-65, 0.8 mile south of intersection of I-65 and Harding Place, Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee

Present Owner: National Society of Colonial Dames of America in Tennessee

Present Use: House Museum

Significance: The site on which Travellers' Rest is situated was acquired by Judge John Overton in 1796, the year Tennessee became a state. The original section of the residence, a simple two-story four-room Federal clapboard house, was erected in 1799 and added to in two subsequent stages. One of the first lawyers in Nashville, Judge Overton was a close friend and advisor of Andrew Jackson, a distinguished Tennessee jurist, and with Jackson a founder of the city of Memphis.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Date of erection: There was some construction at the farm in the fall of 1798 and a house was being erected there the following spring. The initial four-room two-story wood-framed clapboard house with a stone cellar was completed by December 1799.

A two-story two-room addition, also wood-framed, was made in 1812, and the resulting two-story block with a five-bay front constituted the simple Federal house that was initially at Travellers' Rest.

In ca. 1821-1829, the long two-story Greek Revival brick ell was added to the Federal block. At the same time, Overton built a carriage house and more cabins for his slaves.

In 1887, the two-story two-room addition was made to the ell. (See Henry L. Swint, "Travellers' Rest: Home of Judge John Overton," More Landmarks of Tennessee (Nashville, 1969), pp. 333-339).

2. Architect(s): none is known to have participated in any of the three stages of construction.

3. Original and Subsequent Owners: Judge Overton purchased the initial 320-acre tract upon which the house is situated in August 1796, from William Maxwell (R.O.D.C. Deed Book "D," p. 62.); this was one-half of a grant no. 367 from the State of North Carolina to David Maxwell. The estate was subsequently expanded by Overton to slightly over 964 acres (R.O.D.C. Deed Books "E," p. 86; "E," p. 393; and "F," p. 67).
4. Builder or Contractor, Suppliers: Two carpenters, David Cumming and Frederick Pinkley, were hired by Judge Overton to construct the original four-room house at Travellers' Rest. They were to hew the corner posts, sills, sleepers, and other heavy timbers, as well as to produce the clapboards and rive the shingles out of which they erected the house; for this, they were sold 320 acres of land on Stone's River for two dollars an acre by Overton (Articles of Agreement, November 7, 1799, in Claybrook-Overton Collection, Manuscript Section, Tennessee State Library and Archives).
5. Original plans and construction: No plans or drawings of any kind have been located for any of the additions. Occasional references to original construction are contained in the architects' report on the restorations of 1966 and 1969 which are included here as supplemental material.

It is known that the original Federal portion of the house was a hewn log frame whose exterior was white beaded clapboard and whose interior was plaster and wainscoting. The roof was of hand-riven shingles.

6. Alterations and additions: The house has undergone numerous stages of extensive remodeling and alteration through the years. Few of the alterations were documented. The first probably occurred when the 1887 addition was made. At that time, the roof of the main house was raised and a heavy cornice was added. The windows were narrowed and lengthened, and interior trim was replaced.

In about 1935, some restoration was attempted in the original portion of the house. The mantel in the parlor, which had been removed in 1887, was replaced with a replica of the original in 1935. The mantel in the library was taken from a house in Franklin and installed in 1936. Also at this time, presumably, bathrooms and plumbing were installed.

The front porch is a 1954 addition. Also in 1954, the mantel in the east bedroom was taken from a house known as "Rokeby" and installed here.

In 1966, a comprehensive restoration of the Federal section of the house was undertaken by Charles W. Warterfield, Jr., of Warterfield and Bass, architects. Warterfield's report is included here as supplemental material. The work, which was extensive, included changing the window shape and size back to the original, removing the cornice, and replacing the clapboarding, cornerboards, shutters and front door. On the interior, he replaced much of the trim with duplications of the original, as well as reconstructing the stairway and moving an interior door.

In 1969, Clinton E. Brush III, of Brush, Hutchison & Gwin, architects, began restoration of the Greek Revival brick wing. Here they removed bathrooms and the kitchen, changed the windows of the dining room and moved an interior wall. The pantry was changed to a rear stairhall. Part of the exterior west wall was rebuilt. At this time the trim of the south front door was changed. The 1887 wing was altered to accommodate a caretaker's apartment and an office for the docents. Brush's report is included in the supplemental material.

The two architects' reports make clear that little of the original fabric of the house has survived. Much had been eliminated during previous alterations, and little could be salvaged during the recent alterations. Many of the elements were restored or duplicated after painstaking research, but in the absence of original objects or definitive documentation, elements were restored on the basis of comparable items in contemporary structures.

B. Historical Events and Persons:

Born in Louisa County, Virginia, Judge John Overton arrived in the Nashville area, then known as the Mero District of North Carolina, in 1789 by way of Kentucky. Shortly thereafter he was appointed Territorial revenue collector by President Washington, an office he maintained from 1795 to 1808. Overton was successful in law and in land speculation. From 1804 to 1810 Overton sat on the Superior Court of Tennessee and in 1811 he became a member of the newly established Supreme Court of Errors and Appeals. He began the custom of writing out decisions in Tennessee courts and in 1813 one of his colleagues, Judge Thomas Emmerson, edited a collection of opinions which became known as "Overton's Reports." This work did much to establish precedent in the judicial system of the state.

He became a close friend and advisor to Andrew Jackson, serving as his campaign manager in the presidential election campaign of 1824; Jackson's biographers agree that his presidential campaign was directed from Travellers' Rest.

After Overton's death in 1833, Travellers' Rest passed to his wife. When Mrs. Overton died almost thirty years later, the estate passed to their son, John. John Overton II, who added considerable acreage to the estate, was a justice of the peace, a member of the state legislature, and was said to be the wealthiest man in Tennessee just prior to the Civil War. He contributed much of his fortune to the Confederacy. The Confederate commander, John B. Hood, made the Overton house his headquarters when he arrived in the Nashville area in 1866 after the battle of Franklin.

Colonel John Overton died in 1898. In the hands of his son, May Overton, Travellers' Rest became one of the leading stud farms for Arabian horses.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Architectural drawings:

Brush, Hutchison & Gwinn, Architects. "Restoration of 1828 Addition. Travellers' Rest, Nashville, Tennessee" Working drawings. May 29, 1969.

Stephens Millwork & Lumber Co. "Restoration of Travellers' Rest." Shop drawings for doors, mantels, and stairway. August-October 1969.

Warterfield and Bass, Architects. "Architectural Restoration of John Overton's Home, 'Traveller's Rest,' Nashville, Tennessee." Working drawings. Project No. 6605. June 1966. (17 sheets).

A plan and an elevation traced from Warterfield's and Brush's restoration drawings have been photocopied and are included here on pages 8 and 9. The plan reflects the building's appearance before the 1969 restoration, while the elevation was drawn after the 1969 restoration. The delineator was Patrick W. Crawford of the National Park Service for the HABS Nashville Project, 1970.

2. Early Views:

A number of assorted photographs are contained in the collection of documents held by the Colonial Dames.

A view of the exterior of the original, or Federal, portion of the house when it was highly "Victorianized" is published in Mrs. James E. Caldwell, Historical and Beautiful Country Homes Near Nashville, Tennessee (Nashville, 1911), pages unnumbered.

Photographs of the restored Federal portion of Travellers' Rest are published in Swint, op. cit.:

- a. exterior facade, opposite p. 329.
- b. entrance hall and stairway, p. 335.
- c. the parlor, p. 338.

3. Bibilography:

a. Primary Sources:

County Clerk's Office for Davidson County, Will Books.

Register's Office for Davidson County, Deed Books.

Records and accounts for the building of "Travellers' Rest," John Overton's home. In the Claybrook and Overton Papers, Manuscripts Section, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Ac. No. 14.

Records of John Overton and the Overton family. In possession of the Nashville chapter of the Colonial Dames of America in Tennessee.

b. Secondary Sources:

Brush, Clinton E. III, "Traveller's Rest. Architect's Report," n.d. Prepared in August 1970, for the restoration of the Greek Revival portion of Travellers' Rest.

Caldwell, Mrs. James E., "Travellers Rest," in her Historic and Beautiful Country Homes Near Nashville, Tennessee (Nashville, Brandon Printing Co., 1911), pages unnumbered.

Davis, Louise, "Travellers Rest." Nashville Tennessean Magazine (April 8, 1956), pp. 20-21.

Federal Writers' Project. Tennessee. A Guide to the State (New York: Viking Press, 1939), p. 376.

The Garden Study Club of Nashville. History of Homes and Gardens of Tennessee. Roberta S. Brandau, ed. (Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1936), pp. 152-153.

Security Title Company. "Abstract of Title for 39 Acres, Tract #2 in deed recorded in Deed Book 561, p. 1." Dated July 11, 1929. Prepared for Harriet Overton Williams.

Wint, Henry Lee, "Travellers' Rest: Home of Judge John Overton," in More Landmarks of Tennessee History. Robert M. McBride, ed. (Nashville: Tennessee Historical Society, 1969), pp. 327-346. Cf. Tennessee Historical Quarterly, XXVI (1967), pp. 119-136.

Warterfield, Charles W., Jr. "Report of the Architect to the Colonial Dames Membership. Restoration of Travellers' Rest." Dated May 6, 1966. Prepared for the restoration of the initial, or Federal portion of the house.

Prepared by: Anatole Senkevitch, Jr.
Architectural Historian
Historic American Buildings Survey
Summer 1970

PART II, ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This L-shaped structure has a Federal main block, a Greek Revival ell, and a Victorian addition on the rear.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent.

B. Description of the Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: This two-story L-shaped structure measures approximately 52' x 107'.
2. Foundations: Ashlar rock-faced Tennessee limestone.
3. Walls: Beaded weatherboarding on the main block, brick ell.
4. Structural system, framing: Main block is heavy timber framing with pegged mortise and tenon joints. Ell has hand-hewn wooden truss roof construction.
5. Porches: L-shaped porch on north and east sides at both first and second levels.
6. Chimneys: Six brick chimneys.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Wooden six-panel door with four-light transom window.

- b. Windows and shutters: First-floor windows of the main block have sixteen-over-twelve-light double-hung sash, second-floor windows have twelve-over-twelve-light sash, the Greek Revival wing windows have six-over-six-light sash, and the Victorian addition has four-over-four-light sash.

- 8. Roof: Gable roof with wooden shingles. Simple cornice molding.

C. Description of the Interior:

- 1. Floor plans: The main block has a center hall with a room on either side, both levels. The rear ell is one room wide.
- 2. Stairways: Quarter-turn stair with winders in entry hall. Service stairs north of dining room.
- 3. Flooring: White ash with handmade nails. Sills, poplar and walnut with wooden pegs.
- 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Painted plaster. Chair rail throughout, wainscoting in some rooms.
- 5. Doors: Six-panel wooden doors.
- 6. Hardware: HL hinge on closet doors.
- 7. Decorative features and trim: Each room has a simple, elegant mantelpiece, but none can be identified as original.

D. Site:

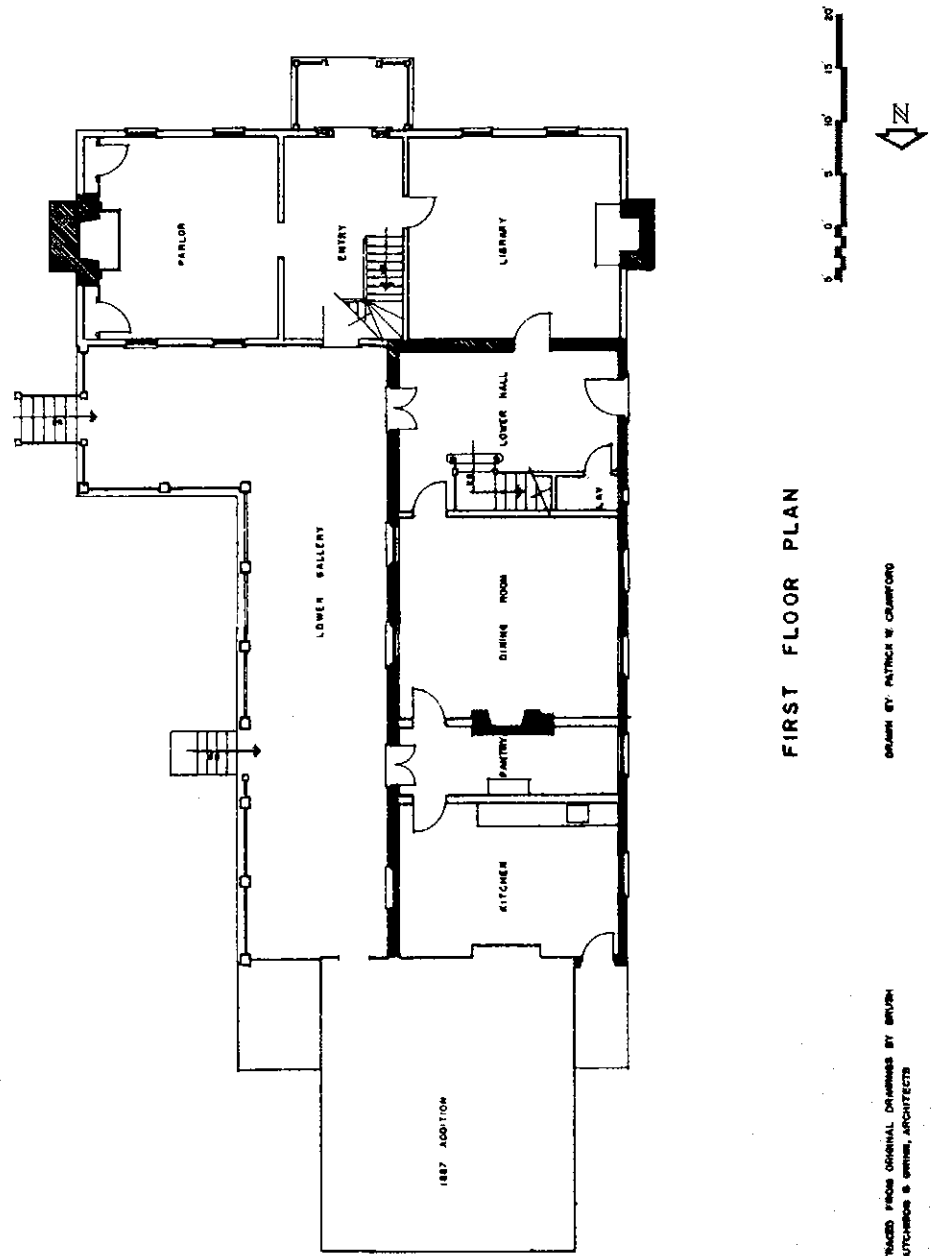
- 1. Orientation: The house faces south.
- 2. Outbuildings: Brick smokehouse and brick slave house on the north side. Brick law office on the south side.

Prepared by: Roy C. Pledger
Project Supervisor
Historic American Buildings Survey
July 1971

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken by the National Park Service in cooperation with the Tennessee Historical Commission and the Historic Sites Federation of Tennessee. This structure was recorded in the summer of 1970, under the direction of James C. Massey, Chief of HABS, by Roy C. Pledger, project supervisor (Texas A & M University), and Anatole Senkevitch, Jr., historian (University of Virginia). Some structures were measured and drawn by student architects Donald W. Graham and William H. Edwards (University of Illinois), and Donna G. Woodrum and Robert J. Dunay (Virginia Polytechnic Institute), at the Historic American Buildings Survey field office, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee. The photographer was Jack E. Boucher of the HABS staff.

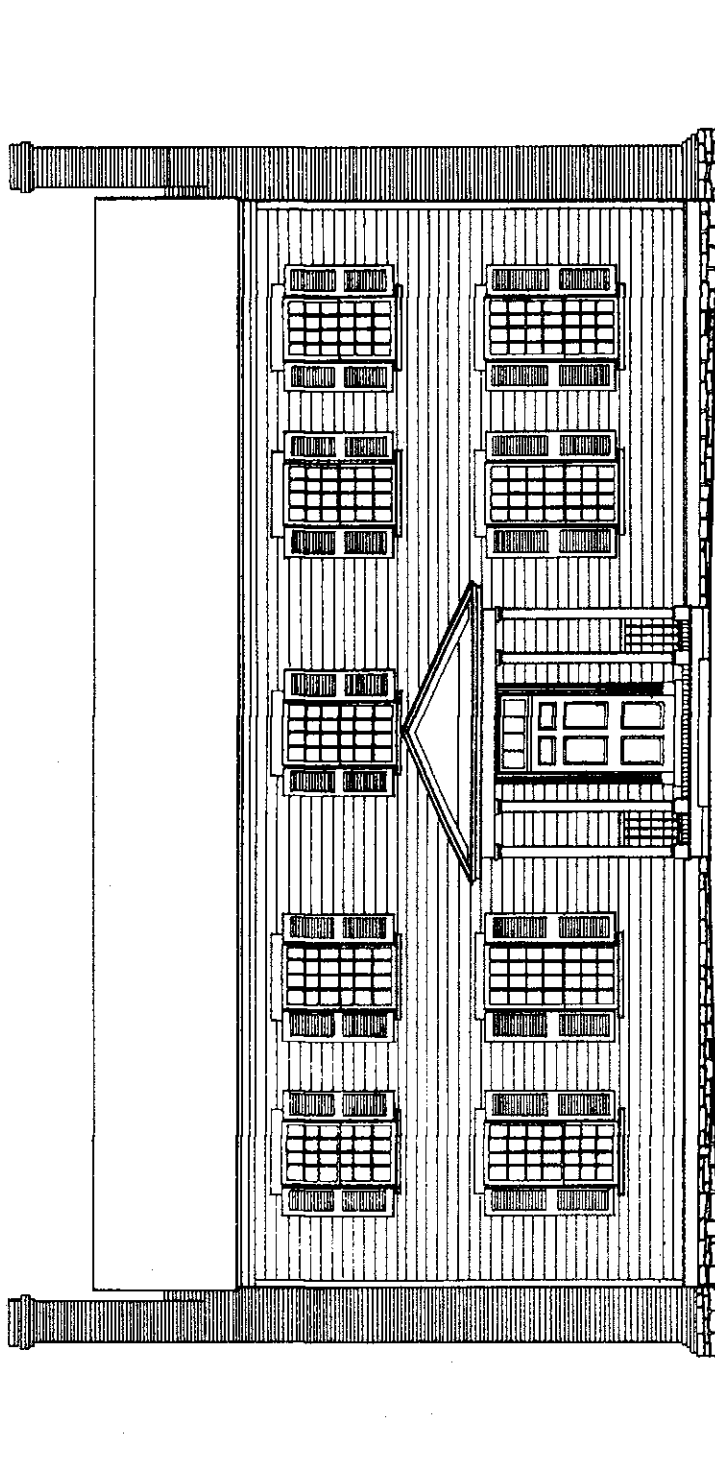
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FIRST FLOOR PLAN

DRAWN BY: PATRICK W. CAMPBELL

NOTE: TRACED FROM ORIGINAL DRAWINGS BY BRUNN
 HUTCHINGS & SONS, ARCHITECTS



SOUTH ELEVATION



DRAWN BY: PATRICK W. CRAWFORD

NOTE: TRACED FROM ORIGINAL DRAWINGS BY BRUSH,
HUTCHISON & SWIN, ARCHITECTS, 3/17/70